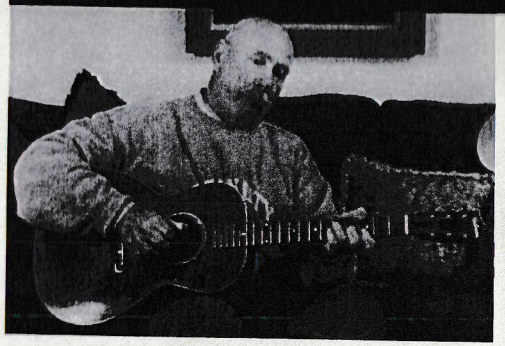
## Artist In Profile



# A Guitarist Who's Finger-Pickin' Good

**Byrne began playing in the late 1950s. His first song was *Nearer My God To Thee.***

**By Larry Ericksen**

*Guitarist and songster Steve Byrne is on a mission to preserve the ragtime blues of the 1920s and 1930s. With a wry wit and engaging personality, Steve tells us of his dedication to this uniquely American style of finger picking, acoustic guitar music.*

I have lived my whole life in South Jersey. As an early baby boomer born in 1945, I grew up in Ventnor on the Jersey Shore. I graduated from Atlantic City High School and went to Bloomfield College where I took up space. I began college listening to Barbra Streisand and finished listening to Bob Dylan. I picked up my first guitar during the Great Folk Singing Scare of the late 1950s and early 1960s. But I had not yet come to appreciate the music of the great blues guitar players who are now my heroes.

Following college I moved to Pitman and worked for National Cash Register in Cherry Hill. After work I took my nylon-string guitar into the Haddonfield Music Store and said I wanted to learn how to play guitar. The first song I learned there was "Nearer My God To Thee" in the early blues style of Mississippi John Hurt. During those weekly music lessons, I learned "tablature" which tells you where to put your fingers.

Today I perform with one Gibson guitar and one Martin guitar. I prefer vintage instruments. The older guitars were made with hide glue which tends to dry out and give an airy and full sound. Braces inside the guitar become loose, letting the guitar top vibrate. I'm always looking for old guitars, banjos and mandolins. I buy, sell and collect them, and I'm constantly changing them around.

People say I play like Leon Redbone, and I guess I do a bit. In the ragtime blues tradition of the southeastern U.S., I play in the highly syncopated Piedmont style which is like two guitars being played to sound like a piano. My right hand picks the strings with my thumb and two fingers. My thumb plays the base part, like the left hand for piano. With my index and middle fingers, I play the melody like the right hand on the piano. Guitar strings are metal; and every time I play with bare fingers, I break a nail. So I use finger picks – a plastic one on my thumb and light metal ones on my fingers.

In the early 1920s, first generation blues was dance music with a jazz ensemble fronted by a female singer.



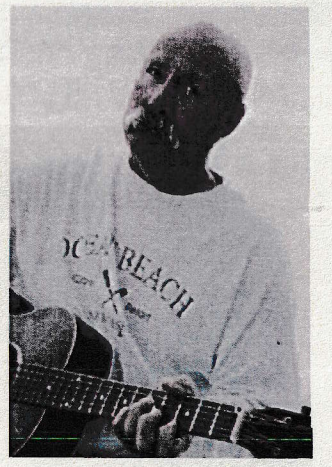
In 1926 a blues record was made by Blind Lemon Jefferson, an incredible guitar player from Texas. This successful record opened the floodgates for other blues men. Record companies called them race records, since African-Americans now needed to buy phonographs from them.

Listening to re-issues of these records, I learned to play and sing the blues from the original blues masters like the Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, Son House, and Joshua White.

All blues musicians must have a noteworthy monicker, and they call me King Eider after that distinguished North Atlantic bird. I chose the name because this duck with the bulbous nose does not quack, it moans—it seductively moans.

In the last 40 years, I have played in venues all over South Jersey, especially coffee houses and bookstores. I performed at Borders bookstores from Princeton to Mays Landing and at Barnes & Noble from Marlton to Deptford. I entertained at coffee houses like No Ordinary Joe in Red Bank, the Java Joint in Toms River and the Golden Mug in Glassboro.

Back in the 1970s, I played at a music festival organized by Jim Albertson at the Physick Estate in Cape May. In 2002 I performed at the New Jersey Folk Festival at Rutgers University when the musical theme was Blues and Gospel. Locally I have entertained in the Millville Arts District and at WheatonArts in the Event Center and in the Folklife Center. Regularly I perform at the Delaware Bay Days and East Point Lighthouse Festivals. Recently I was invited to play with nationally known musicians in the Guitar Wizards concert at Cumberland County College.



**Steve Byrne likes acoustic guitars and the music traditionally identified with them.**

My wife, Chris, and I enjoy birding along the Delaware Bay. So ten years ago we decided to move from Gloucester County to Cumberland County. Now living in Fortescue, we can see hawks, osprey, and purple martins right out of our back window. For a while, I ran a crab boat rental company called Downe by the Creek in Dividing Creek.

My appearance comes from the fact that I had no time to get my hair cut, so I began shaving my head. My mustache, however, is older than my kids.

When I play, I always try to involve the audience. If people want to come up to sing or dance, I encourage them—it's fun getting people involved. I am a big ham and that makes a difference in my performances. I only play the music I like. I never did this for the money, otherwise I would be playing cover songs in the bars. Through entertainment, I am preserving the traditions of ragtime blues and passing that knowledge of this great American music to my audience.

Ragtime and blues combined to create jazz, they are the three true forms of American music.